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SPIRITUALITY ON THE STREETS

Findings from Participatory Research with Street Children and Youth in Three African Cities

Briefing Paper 9 · December 2016

KEY POINTS

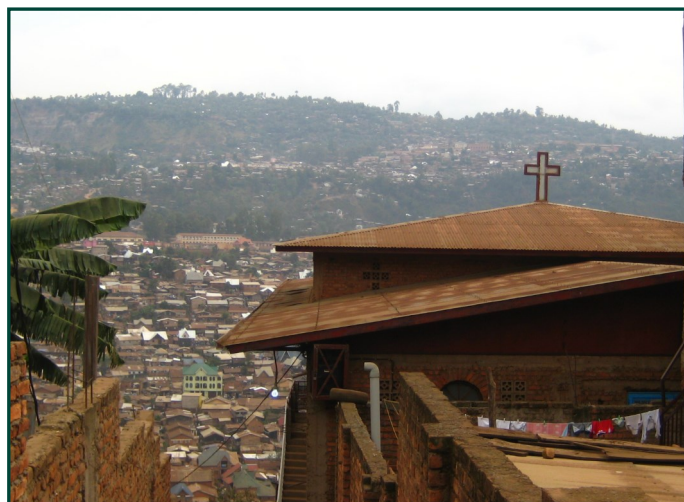
- Spirituality is a complex and important aspect of street life, impacting the physical, social and psychological wellbeing of street children and youth.
- Faith in God can make life more bearable for young people growing up on the streets and give hope for the future.
- Belief in witchcraft among the general population can further marginalise street children and youth as they risk becoming victims of witchcraft accusations.
- Street children and youth engage with witchcraft and magic if they believe it will help them as a survival strategy.

INTRODUCTION

In Accra (Ghana), Bukavu (Democratic Republic of Congo) and Harare (Zimbabwe) spiritual beliefs and practices are central to the lived experiences of street children and youth. Religious faith, witchcraft and magic are integral aspects of everyday survival and physical, social and psychological wellbeing. This Briefing Paper explores how spirituality shapes the thoughts and practices of *Growing up on the Streets* participants. It draws on around one year of interview data and focus groups qualitatively coded under 'spirituality' in this longitudinal and participatory research project.

DEFINING SPIRITUALITY

Spirituality emerges in diverse, yet often interrelated, ways in the lives of children and youth. While it is not possible here to fully critique the complexity of spirituality in all forms, this Briefing Paper addresses its relevance in the lives of street children and youth growing up in situations characterised by profound insecurity. Academic literature defines a narrow 'new age' spirituality distinctive of Western contexts; here in the street context it is defined as beliefs, experiences and practices concerned with (and opportunities and threats posed by) supernatural deities, realms and/or powers. This includes engagements with formal religion such as Christianity and Islam but also magic (known as juju), witchcraft, and other spiritual beliefs and practices.



Christian Branhamist church in Bukavu, DRC; following a twentieth century American prophet.

SPIRITUALITY AND FAITH

Across the three cities street children and youth share a strong belief in God and find consolation, comfort and hope in their faith. Faith in God gives a sense of worth and can make life more meaningful, particularly in the context of the harsh experiences on the street: "I feel that because God is alive I will never give up; I will push forward and I know things will be well" (Accra Resilience Focus Group 7, April 2014). In Accra specifically, participants made a direct link between faith and resilience: "I have resilience every day that it comes I face it and continue because I know that one day God will prove it" (Anantoge, Accra 15 July 2012). Indications of faith manifest in particular when participants express

CASE STUDY: FAITH AND FATALISM IN ACCRA

Apart from being indications that faith may provide a sense of worth, belonging, or comfort to street children and youth, their expressions offer valuable insights in how they think about human agency. When questioned about their plans for the future, even those for the next day, participants often answer that “they don’t know” or even that they “cannot know” since it is “only God who knows”: “From here I will go to sell marijuana; that is all that I will do till evening. [Tomorrow] I will be waiting on God” (Accra Future Plans Focus Group 3, 18 November 2014). Belief in (the power of) God can be associated with differentiating between what lies within and beyond their own agency, at times leading to passivity, or even fatalism.

hope that with God’s help, their life will change for the better. Besides an indication of a belief in God’s power, such references also reveal experiences of solitude: “I don’t have any helper; the only helper I know is God; my mother left me in the hands of God not any other person” (Josephine, Accra, 10 March 2014), or a partnership with God: “I usually go in a group of two: I and my God!” (Bukavu Safe Movement Focus Group 5, October 2014).

Faith becomes most tangible in prayers. Through prayers, street children and youth in Bukavu ask for God’s (practical) assistance in their daily lives: “I’ve been praying to God for rain so that a lot of cars will need to be cleaned and we can make some money” (Didier, Bukavu, 17 May 2013). “My boss is not fair: he pays others 2,000 francs [£1.60] and sufficient fish but he always gives me 200 francs [16 pence] and my handful of fish. That’s why I always pray God to widen my hand so that it may contain more fish” (Bukavu Earnings Focus Group 4, June 2014). Participants also seek God’s support when embarking on illegal operations: “We also pray God to bless us in order to earn money from stealing, and he does it. Even a witch prays for God to help her succeed in her business” (Bukavu Earnings Focus Group 4, June 2014). Street children and youth claim they find enjoyment and inner peace through church attendance, and talk about “praying, singing and glorifying the Lord”: “for me, when I go to church, I become very happy” (Accra Play Focus Group 7, January 2014). Bible study is a manifestation of faith and a source of solace: “when I am tired I go to my base and get my Bible and read” (Harare Earnings Focus Group 5, October 2013). In Accra, participants refer to the



Worshippers sit outside Bukavu Cathedral on a busy Sunday.

Bible for moral guidance: “Yes, it is even quoted in the Bible that ‘do to others what you want them to do to you’” (Accra Friends Focus Group 8, July 2014). Some interpretations of the Bible have potential consequences for participants’ health: “it is written in the Holy books that we should not use anything to attach our penis. Because of that when I have sex with a woman, I don’t use [a condom]” (Accra Health & Wellbeing Focus Group 3, May 2013).

SPIRITUALITY AND VULNERABILITY

Whereas faith in God can be empowering for street children and youth, as a motivation to never lose hope, belief in other spiritual forces can increase both their perceived and actual vulnerability in various ways. Firstly, across the three cities, participants emphasize feelings of vulnerability in their shelters and at night, typically describing places as “bewitched” or “evil” with “bad spirits haunting in the night”: “The kind of things that we see in the night, it is not good. Spiritual beings and ghosts [...] And some of us too, we are not all human beings” (Accra Shelter Focus Group 2, February 2013). Lake Kivu in Bukavu, and its shores are considered a spiritually dangerous location. Nevertheless, street children and youth often sleep near or in the lake (in canoes). A boy narrates: “I once woke up at night and saw a man washing in the lake. I wondered how a man could wash at such a time! When I came closer to him, he asked me, ‘Why do you, small child, come closer to me while I am washing?’ instead of seeing a man, I saw a big cat which jumped into the lake and disappeared” (Bukavu Health & Wellbeing Focus Group 3, January 2014).

In Harare, participants express a sense of vulnerability when interacting with mainstream society; manifested in mistrust of apparent acts of generosity: “There are some

women who came there, I think the Ndebele-Satanists, because they came with two paper bags of food, one had rice and the other had meat; they gave to the boys and after eating the boys started to be ill" (Brighton, Harare 21 November 2012). Often, street children and youth have a very negative spiritual self-image, attributing their situation to possession by spirits: "Sometimes, somebody who doesn't love you can bewitch you to become a 'maibobo' (street child)" (Bukavu Health & Wellbeing Focus Group 3, June 2014). Girls in particular are at risk of being accused of witchcraft. In Bukavu, a group of girls recount a close escape: "One day we slept in a kitchen and we didn't get up early in the morning to leave that place, when people got up they were astonished to see us there. They brought machetes and knives to kill us, thinking that we are witches. By chance the boys of that quarter who know us and with whom we smoke hemp, put in a good word for us and we were liberated" (Bukavu Shelter Focus Group 6, September 2013). Finally, young people feel they are an easy targets for ritual murder: "It may be a way of juju, they will be looking for a person to sacrifice, especially those that stay in the street [...] They think 'if I take a person from street and do what I want, no-one will care about him'" (Brighton, Harare, 21 November 2012).

SPIRITUALITY AND SURVIVAL

Whereas witchcraft-related beliefs and practices can exacerbate the marginalization of young people on the street, spirituality is also used as a versatile tool for

CASE STUDY: RITUAL MURDER IN BUKAVU

In 2013-14 Bukavu was shocked by a series of ritual killings with kabanga, a "magic cord" used to strangle people. After being used to murder a victim, the cord is said to hold mystic power, bringing wealth and prosperity to the owner, and can thus be sold for a lot of money. One street girl known to *Growing up on the Streets* participants became the latest victim of this type of ritual murder. Her death had a devastating impact on the research participants: "we met a corpse of an old man hanged by the 'kabanga' magic cord [...] we have just heard that one of our 'sisters' has been also killed with the same cord. [...] We slept only three persons in the former stall. Being afraid of being hanged by the 'kabanga' magic cord, we moved to the new one where we are numerous" (Baba, Bukavu, 30 December 2013).

CASE STUDY: CHURCH SHOPPING IN HARARE

To maximise opportunities for assistance, street children in Harare strategically shift religious identities; 'shopping' at different churches throughout the day: "These days food is not a problem because at Anglican they get food in the afternoon; and another church they are giving food at night" (Brighton, Harare 18 September 2013). Hence religious conversions and re-conversions are common. But religious and pragmatic motives are certainly not always seen as incompatible: "I go to Makandiwa [church] to go pray and get food" (Harare Play Focus Group 3, February 2013).

survival, helping street children and youth to navigate challenging street situations. In all three cities, but most prominently in Harare, street children and youth rely on churches for assistance. To encourage church attendance or in acts of charity, churches often offer snacks, a meal, clothes or transportation fees to street children and youth who participate in religious services. Services usually take place on Sundays when there are fewer markets in town and therefore few opportunities for street children and youth to meet their basic daily needs. As one participant from Harare explains: "on Sundays we survive on church" (Harare Accessing Food Focus Group, October 2012).



Jesuit Church, Harare, Zimbabwe.

In the same city, charms or fetishist magical objects believed to enhance success in daily economic activities such as selling, stealing, prostitution, or gambling are also widely used. Both boys and girls use juju; a collection of herbs which they buy in the market or from witchdoctors. One boy explains: "there is a granny who sells the juju; you go there and tell her the juju you want; like 'nyumwa-nyumwa' (predicting) to know if a person has money and you will steal and not be caught" (Harare, Play Focus Group 6, January 2013).



Figure. Examples of the opportunities and threats posed by spirituality, as experienced by participants.

Such spiritual support is seen as complementary to worldly survival, as one participant emphasises: “surviving is mixing; others come in a direct ways and others are into juju” (Dai, Harare, 23 January 2013). In Accra and Bukavu, street children and youth try their luck seeking “spiritual money”. This is money believed to come from a spiritual world and requires extreme counter-payments such as human sacrifices. In Accra, young people share stories about performing occult rituals at cemeteries at night, sometimes involving human body parts, as part of their quest for spiritual money. In Bukavu, young people believe they can find spiritual money in “kuzimu”, the underworld located under Lake Kivu. However, one cannot enter kuzimu without first sacrificing (i.e. murdering) a person. A research participant shares an alternative plan: “I’ll go to the edge of the lake one night to wait for the people who go after hell’s money ‘kuzimu’ (with Satan) and stop them when they come back and scare them so much that they end up giving me a big amount of the money that they’ve brought back with them” (Baba, 13 May 2013). Unlike the use of charms, seeking such “spiritual money” should not be seen as a “mixing” of survival strategies, but as a desperate hope for those in despair.



Mosque at Kalengera, Bukavu.

CONCLUSION

Spirituality is a fundamental and integral aspect of street life. Street children and youth show a deep religious faith and an unshakable hope that one day God will change their lives, making present hardships more bearable. At the same time, spiritual beliefs and practices aggravate their already vulnerable position in society, exposing them to fears of evil beings and places, targeted acts of cruelty, accusations of witchcraft and even ritual murder. Spirituality provides an alternative repertoire for survival, including the use of good luck charms or the hope of large sums of “spiritual money”.

Role of spirituality in RESILIENCE	A	B	H
Aid (e.g. food/clothes distributed by churches)	++	++	+++
Faith (belief and hope)	+++	+++	+++
Witchcraft (e.g. charms, spiritual money)	++	+++	++
Role of spirituality in VULNERABILITY	A	B	H
Victimization (e.g. ritual murder)	+	+++	++
Accusations of witchcraft	+	++	+
Fear (e.g. of demons, spiritual harm)	+++	+++	++

Table. Role of spirituality in resilience and vulnerability of street children and youth. + = Evident; ++ = Prominent; +++ = Very prominent. A = Accra, B = Bukavu, H = Harare.



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